BASED ON THE SHORT STORY BY ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

THE WITCHER®

THE LESSER EVIL



JACEK
REMBIŚ

BORYS
PUGACZ-
MURASZKIEWICZ

ADAM
GORHAM

PATRICIO
DELPECHE

HASSAN
OTSMANE-ELHAOU

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ORIGINAL SHORT STORY
ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

STORY ADAPTATION
JACEK REMBIŚ

ENGLISH ADAPTATION
BORYS PUGACZ-MURASZKIEWICZ

ART
ADAM GORHAM

COLORS
PATRICIO DELPECHE

LETTERS
HASSAN OTSMANE-ELHAOU

COVER ART
KAI CARPENTER

DARK HORSE BOOKS



The outskirts of Blaviken...

?

HISSS

ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI'S

THE LESSER EVIL

BY THE GODS, GERALT! WHAT WERE THIS BEAST?

A KIKIMORE, EALDORMAN. REWARD POSTED? WAITIN' FOR ME TO COLLECT?

HOW'D YE...? *WHERE'D* YE...?

SWAMPS. ON A DIKE A LITTLE WAYS OUT, FOUR MILES MAYBE.

CALDEMEYN, FOLK DIED OUT THERE. MUST'VE.

CHILDREN, TOO.

GO ON, NEIGHBORS! TO THY 'OMES, THY JOBS! NOWT TO SEE 'ERE, NO GRAND SPECTACLE!

COVER THE WRETCH, GERALT. FLIES'RE SWARMIN' ALREADY.

AN' YE AN' ME, LET'S GO INSIDE.

I 'AVEN'T ANY BRASS FOR IT, I FEAR. NOBODY SUSPECTED A BEAST AS DANGEROUS AS *THAT* LURKED THERE. WE 'AVEN'T HAD SO MUCH AS AN *IMP* PISS IN OUR MILK CANS LATELY.

ROTTEN LUCK. WHAT WITH WINTER COMING, ***REALLY*** COULD'VE USED THE COIN.

YOU'VE A NOOK TO HIDE AWAY IN? I'VE ROOM IF YE'D LIKE. IN MY ATTIC.

BE MORE'N GLAD TO USE IT. BUT, *Uh...*

...YOUR LIBUSHKA? CAN'T SAY SHE'S EVER LIKED ME MUCH.

Ah, IT IN'T ANY TROUBLE. BUT YE MUSTN'T REPEAT NOWT OF WHAT YE DID LAST TIME... OR DO YER BEST TO TRY.

TALKIN' ABOUT THE RAT? FORK I TOSSED AT IT?

BZIIIII

GERALT, YE SKEWERED THE VERMIN AT RANGE, IN PITCH DARK.

KLUNK

ANYROAD... THIS KIKI... THIS ***BEAST.*** WILL YE BE NEEDIN' THE CARCASS?

KIKIMORE. COULD DUMP IT IN THE MUCK IF THERE'S NO REWARD...

YE ***COULD*** DO THAT...

BANG

...BUT I'VE A ***BETTER*** NOTION, I WAGER.

COME, GERALT. WE'VE SOMEONE WE OUGHT TO TALK TO--

--***MASTER IRION.***

PER'APS OUR LOCAL MAGE WILL REWARD YE FOR YER TROUBLE.

THIS... MASTER IRION-- WHAT'S HE LIKE?

DECENT ENOUGH, THAT'UN, 'ELPS FOLK WHEN HE LEAVES THE TOWER. THOUGH THAT'S NEAR ***NEVER.*** A LONER, HE IS, BUT MIGHTY, I MUST SAY.

YE'LL SEE FOR YERSELF, GERALT.

LIKELY TO HEAR NOTHIN' BUT ***INSULTS,*** ACTUALLY. MAGES AND WITCHERS'VE ***NEVER*** BEEN FRIENDLY.

EALDORMAN CALDEMEYN GREETS MASTER IRION! AS DOES GERALT OF RIVIA. WE'VE SOME BUSINESS.

LEAVE, KIND SOULS. MASTER IRION TAKES NO VISITORS.

I'M NO ***KIND*** SOUL...

...I'M A ***WITCHER.***

*IS IT TRULY YOU, GERALT? COME **CLOSER.** I'LL LET YOU IN...*

BROUGHT A DEAD KIKIMORE. KILLED IT, A SHORT WAY OUTTA TOWN...

FORGET THE KIKIMORE. I WISH TO SPEAK WITH YOU, GERALT, AND YOU ALONE. MY APOLOGIES, EALDORMAN.

SLAM

HEY...!

WELCOME, WITCHER.

STREGOBOR!

NOW DO TELL, HOW IS ONE NOT TO BELIEVE IN DESTINY? UNLESS YOU KNEW FULL WELL I WAS HERE AND CAME SEARCHING?

NO, HAD NO IDEA. LAST I REMEMBER, YOU WERE LIVING IN KOVIR.

DESTINY MIGHT ASSUME ***MANY*** FORMS. MINE APPEARS AS PURE BEAUTY, YET IS FOUL WITHIN. IT REACHES FOR ME WITH ***BLOODY CLAWS...***

HAVEN'T CHANGED A BIT. RAMBLING AS EVER WHILE PUTTING ON A CLEVER FACE. CAN'T JUST SPEAK ***NORMALLY?***

Ah, WELL, SPEAKING *"NORMALLY,"* MY DEAR GERALT, MY LIFE IS IN ***DANGER.***

"CURSE OF THE BLACK SUN-- YOU'VE HEARD OF IT?"

"COURSE. KNOWN ALSO AS THE MANIA OF MAD ELTIBALD.

"A SORCERER WHO INSPIRED THE IMPRISONMENT AND MURDER OF DOZENS OF GIRLS FROM GREAT HOUSES.

"ROYAL HOUSES, EVEN.

"WORD WAS THEY WERE POSSESSED BY DEMONS. *CURSED, TAINTED.* ALL BY... AN ORDINARY OLD ECLIPSE."

"ELTIBALD WAS HARDLY MAD. HE'D DECIPHERED INSCRIPTIONS ON DAUK MENHIRS, VOZGOR TOMB-STONES. DELVED DEEP INTO BUGBEAR LEGENDS AND LORE...

"ALL HE DECODED DESCRIBED THE ECLIPSE IN RATHER *DEFINITE* TERMS.

"THE BLACK SUN WAS THE *HARBINGER OF THE COMING OF LILITH,* WORSHIPED IN THE EAST TO THIS DAY AS *NIYA.* LILITH, WHO WAS TO BRING ABOUT THE *END OF THE HUMAN RACE.*

"AND STRIDING BEFORE HER HUMBLY? A PROCESSION OF... MAIDENS. ALL BEARING CROWNS OF GOLD. THE VALLEYS TO RUN THICK WITH BLOOD AT THEIR HANDS."

ALL ***NONSENSE.*** ELTIBALD AND THE COUNCIL OF MAGES WERE OUT TO USE HIS MAD RAMBLINGS TO CONSOLIDATE POWER, BOLSTER THEIR AUTHORITY.

TRUE, SOMEWHAT, THAT THE VALIDITY OF ELTIBALD'S THEORIES IS... ***DEBATABLE.*** YET THE FACT REMAINS--

--MUTATIONS WERE PREVALENT IN GIRLS BORN JUST AFTER THE ECLIPSE.

I MYSELF ASSISTED IN THE AUTOPSY OF ONE. INTERNAL ORGANS-- A JUMBLE, SIX VENTRICLES...

SEEN ***LOTS*** WORSE THAN THAT. NEAR ALWAYS THE RESULT OF DABBLING WITH MAGIC.

YOU'VE SEEN ***MANY*** MUTATED HUMANS, YOU SAY. HOW MANY DID YOU ***SLAUGHTER*** FOR ***COIN,*** IN LINE WITH YOUR WITCHERLY CALLING?

WOULDN'T YOU RATHER KNOW HOW MANY I ***CURED?***

SCORN'S EASY TOWARDS A WITCHER. BUT WHAT'VE ***MIGHTY SORCERERS*** DONE TO MITIGATE IN THESE CASES?

WE'VE EMPLOYED ***HIGHER*** MAGIC. SORCERERS AND TEMPLE PRIESTS ALIKE.

ALAS, ALL OUR ATTEMPTS HAVE RESULTED IN ***DEATH.***

AND YOU BASTARDS ***DARE*** CONDEMN WITCHERS?

GONNA TELL ME YOU NEVER MADE A SINGLE MISTAKE IN HUNTING THESE SUPPOSED *"MUTANTS"*?

VERY WELL, YOU WIN. I SHALL BE HONEST, THOUGH IT'S LIKELY NOT IN MY BEST INTEREST.

WE COMMITTED ERRORS. ON MULTIPLE OCCASIONS. AND THUS WE CEASED... *ELIMINATING* THEM, OPTING INSTEAD TO ISOLATE AS THE BEST COURSE OF ACTION.

GIRLS DIED IN THE DUNGEONS ALL THE SAME, FAR AS I KNOW. AND SOME OF *YOU* HELPED 'EM ALONG.

NO, *A BARE-FACED LIE,* THIS. RATHER, THEY GREW APATHETIC, REFUSED NOURISHMENT...

...INTERESTINGLY, MANY REVEALED AN APTITUDE FOR *CLAIRVOYANCE* SHORTLY BEFORE THEIR DEMISE. YET *MORE* EVIDENCE OF THEIR MUTATION...

EVEN *LESS* CONVINCING THAN ANY OTHER YOU'VE MENTIONED.

LISTEN TO ME, GERALT--

NO, DONE LISTENING. NOTHING YOU CAN SAY'LL CONVINCE ME YOU WERE RIGHT. OR THAT ELTIBALD WASN'T A *MURDEROUS MADMAN.*

NOW... LET'S TALK ABOUT THIS *MONSTER* YOU'RE CLAIMING'S A THREAT TO YOU...

"IN THAT CASE, WELL, OUR TALE BEGINS IN CREYDEN, A SMALL NORTHERN DUCHY.

"ARIDEA, SECOND WIFE TO PRINCE FREDEFALK OF CREYDEN, WAS A ***WISE*** WOMAN, QUITE WELL EDUCATED. SHE HAD INHERITED FROM AN ANCESTOR A ***MIRROR OF NEHALENI,*** AN ARTIFACT THOUGHT TO BE PLAINLY ORACULAR, A ***WINDOW INTO THE FUTURE...***"

"*WHO'S THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL?*'-- THAT WHAT SHE ASKED IT?"

"*Tsk, tsk,* GERALT, YOU ***JEST.*** ARIDEA HAD NO SUCH TRIFLES ON HER MIND. RATHER, WHAT CONCERNED HER MOST WAS HER LAND, ITS STABILITY, PROSPERITY, SUCCESS.

"THE MIRROR FORETOLD NOTHING OF THE SORT. SHE SAW WITHIN IT...

"...***DEATH.*** HER OWN, THAT OF MANY OF HER SUBJECTS. DEATH BROUGHT ON BY FREDEFALK'S FIRSTBORN, A DAUGHTER FROM HIS PREVIOUS MARRIAGE.

"A DAUGHTER BORN SHORTLY AFTER THE ECLIPSE.

"ARIDEA NOTIFIED THE COUNCIL, WHICH DELEGATED ***ME*** TO TRAVEL TO CREYDEN TO INVESTIGATE.

"I OBSERVED... ***TESTED*** THE CHILD. AND CONFIRMED THE GIRL TO BE A MUTANT INDEED.

"I THEN REVEALED MY FINDINGS TO ARIDEA. AS I SAID, A ***WISE*** WOMAN."

"WHO SAW HER OWN OFFSPRING AS HEIRS. SOMEONE SHOULD'VE ***SNAPPED YOUR NECK*** THEN AND THERE."

"I WISHED ONLY TO SEE THE CHILD ***ISOLATED.*** THE DUCHESS DECIDED ***ELSEWISE.***

"A HUNTSMAN WAS TO... DO THE ***DEED.*** SOME TIME LATER, WE FOUND HIM IN THE FOREST, TROUSERS ROUND HIS ANKLES, THE PIN OF A BROOCH RUN THROUGH HIS ***EAR*** TO HIS ***BRAIN.***"

"THINK I GOT ANY SYMPATHY FOR HIM? ***THINK AGAIN.***"

"FOUR YEARS ON, ARIDEA MANAGED TO TRACK THE GIRL DOWN. SHE WAS LIVING IN MAHAKAM WITH ***SEVEN GNOMES***-- CAROUSING, FORNICATING, AMBUSHING, AND ROBBING ANYONE UNLUCKY ENOUGH TO PASS NEAR THEIR LAIR."

"A ***LITTLE GIRL*** NO MORE..."

"***NO,*** INDEED. SHE HAD EARNED A MONIKER-- ***'SHRIKE.'***

"IT EMERGED FROM THE PENCHANT SHE'D SHOWN FOR ***IMPALING*** HER CAPTIVES ON STAKES AND WATCHING AS LIFE... ***EBBED*** FROM THEM.

"ALSO, ***VERY FEW*** MEN WERE HER MATCH IN BLADEWORK.

"SOME TIME LATER, A STRING OF TRAGEDIES ENSUED-- ARIDEA WAS ***POISONED,*** PRINCE FREDEFALK PERISHED IN A ***FREAK ACCIDENT,*** AND ARIDEA'S ELDEST SON ***VANISHED WITHOUT A TRACE.*** EVIDENCE SUGGESTED THIS WAS ALL THE OUTCAST'S DOING.

"A ***TUMULTUOUS*** SOUL... A ROW, SEEMINGLY FROM A TRIFLE, BROKE OUT BETWEEN THE GIRL AND THE GNOMES. A FIGHT ENSUED, AND ***RENFRI*** ALONE SURVIVED."

"RENFRI?"

"WHY... THE ***LASS'S NAME.***

"NOT LONG AFTER, SHE TRACKED ME DOWN. WE CAME EYE TO EYE, AND I BARELY MANAGED TO CAST A SPELL IN TIME...

"I *FROZE* HER IN A BLOCK OF MOUNTAIN CRYSTAL, CAST HER DOWN THE SHAFT OF A DWARVEN MINE, *COLLAPSED MOUNDS* OF ROCK AND EARTH ATOP HER."

"*BOTCHED IT.* EASY SPELL TO LIFT, THAT."

"INDEED, I *MISHANDLED IT.* SOME IDIOT PRINCE FOUND HER, OVERPAID A MINOR MAGE TO LIFT THE SPELL.

"I SHALL SPARE YOU THE DETAILS OF WHAT ENSUED, *BLOODY BUSINESS* THAT IT WAS.

"THE ESSENTIAL THING YOU MUST KNOW-- SHRIKE *NEVER* FORGOT ABOUT ME. SHE'S TRACKED ME DOWN ONCE AGAIN..."

"HOW DO YOU *KNOW?*"

I'VE SEEN HER IN MY GLASS SPHERE. SHE'S *NOT* ALONE.

AND SHE'S PREPARING SOMETHING, I DARESAY, *SPECTACULAR.*

THAT YOU FIND YOURSELF HERE IS NO COINCIDENCE. IT'S DESTINY, SURELY.

MEANING?

I BELIEVE IT'S CLEAR. *YOU MUST KILL HER.*

I'M NO *SELLSWORD,* STREGOBOR. ONLY KILL MONSTERS FOR GOLD, NOT *HUMANS.*

AGREED, BUT SHE IS *NO* HUMAN. THE LASS IS A *MONSTER,* A *MUTANT,* AN **ABERRATION.**

TOLD YOU ALREADY. LILITH'S MUTATION, THE CURSE-- STORIES'RE ALL HOGWASH, AS I SEE IT.

EALDORMAN'LL HELP YOU. VILLAGE MILITIA'LL PROTECT THEIR LOCAL MAGE.

THE EALDORMAN, MILITIA?!

*TO **HELL** WITH THEM!*

I DON'T REQUIRE *PROTECTION!* I NEED YOU TO *KILL HER!*

NOTHING AND *NO ONE* CAN ENTER THIS TOWER WITHOUT MY PERMISSION. MUCH LESS DO ME ANY HARM INSIDE.

BUT YOU WOULD HAVE ME SPEND THE REST OF MY DAYS *HERE?!*

YOU PUT *YOURSELF* HERE, STREGOBOR, GOT NO ONE ELSE TO BLAME.

MANY AMONG US HAD DOUBTS ABOUT ELTIBALD. YET WE DECIDED UPON A COURSE OF ACTION THAT WAS THE *LESSER OF TWO EVILS.*

I TRULY HOPE YOU TOO WILL MAKE THIS CHOICE.

EVIL IS *EVIL,* STREGOBOR.

LESSER, GREATER, MIDDLING. THE DEGREE IS ARBITRARY, THE DEFINITIONS BLURRED.

MIGHT SOUND LIKE ONE, BUT I'M NOT A PIOUS HERMIT. MY LIFE HASN'T BEEN ONE OF *PURE VIRTUE.*

BUT IF I'M TO CHOOSE BETWEEN ONE EVIL AND ANOTHER... I'D RATHER *NOT CHOOSE* AT ALL.

TIME I WAS ON MY WAY. SEE YOU, STREGOBOR.

PERHAPS. And perhaps *not.*

Some time later...

SIX MEN AND A LASS, ALL IN BLACK. I SPIED THEM AT THE EDGE OF TOWN. WHERE MIGHT THEY BE?

DININ' ALCOVE.

GOIN' IN ALONE, GONNA BRING HER OUT. NO NEED TO MAKE THIS OFFICIAL.

PER'APS YE'RE RIGHT. DON'T WANT ANY TROUBLE, MIND YOU!

GONNA STRIVE TO BE MY DOCILE BEST...

WHA'?

HERE TO TALK TO *SHRIKE.*

WHO'S IT YA SEEK? WHO'S THIS... SHRIKE?

CUT THE CRAP. SOME-ONE YOU KNOW...

KNOW THIS BLOKE, NOHORN?

IN POINT OF FACT, I DO *NOT.*

BELIEVE I'VE SEEN 'IM ROUND.

AN ALBINO MUTANT, LOOKS LIKE TO ME. A FREAK.

SAY YER PIECE, MATE, THEN *PISS OFF.*

GOT NOTHIN' TO SAY TO YOU. WANNA TALK TO SHRIKE. RENFRI.

AWRIGHT. THOUGH THE QUESTION REMAINS-- *WHY?*

THAT'S JUST NOT YOUR CONCERN.

Aww, I KNOW! HE'S BEEN BY THE EALDORMAN'S HOUSE. WORD IS HE'S A *WITCHER.*

A *witcher?* What's that, Civril?

A *MAGE FOR HIRE,* AN EXPENSIVE *FRAUD,* A *FREAK* OF *NATURE.* WHO BEGETS THESE MUTANTS, I WONDER?

COULD STAND TO BE A TOUCH MORE SYMPATHETIC. LOOKIN' AT YOU, SEEMS YOUR *MOTHER* LIKED TO *FROLIC* WITH *FOREST BEASTS.*

THAT MAY BE...

...BUT AT LEAST I *KNEW* MY MOTHER.

Oooy, MATE, GONNA LET CIVRIL GET AWAY WITH THAT? GOTTA CHALLENGE 'IM TO A DUEL. MAKE THE AFTER-NOON INTERESTIN'.

NOT HAPPENING.

Ah well. STILL, YA DID INSULT MY COMRADE'S MOTHER.

HEY, FIFTEEN! DO WE TAKE KINDLY TO STRAGGLERS INSULTIN' OUR MATES' MOTHERS?

BANG

PTOOO

IF YOU DIDN'T CATCH THAT, FIFTEEN 'ERE JUST CHALLENGED YE TO ***FISTICUFFS.***

STAND TO LOSE MORE THAN A ***FEW TEETH*** IF YOU'RE NOT CAREFUL.

WHAT THE ***HELL*** IS ***THIS?*** CAN I NOT LEAVE YOU LOT FOR EVEN A ***SECOND?!***



WELL? OUT WITH IT! SPEAK UP!
HE'S A WITCHER. A MAGE. SAID HE WANTED TO TALK TO *YOU.*
WE DON'T LIKE MAGES.
THERE'S NEVER ANY HARM IN *TALKING.* YOU LOT ENJOY YOURSELVES TODAY. MARKET DAY'S TOMORROW.
AN *IMPORTANT* DAY. IT WOULDN'T DO TO DISTURB THE VILLAGERS WITH REVELRY AND ANTICS.
HAHAHA!
Ah, RENFRI! AN IMPORTANT DAY *INDEED!*
NOW YOU SHUT YOUR MOUTH, CIVRIL.
COME, WHITE-HAIRED ONE. LET'S YOU AND I JOIN THE EALDORMAN. *HE* WISHES TO SPEAK WITH ME AS WELL, I IMAGINE.

THIS WITCHER OF RIVIA'S REVEALED TO ME YER REASONS FOR COMIN' TO BLAVIKEN. YE'VE A *SCORE* TO SETTLE, A GRUDGE YE BEAR TOWARDS OUR *SORCERER.*

PERHAPS. WHAT OF IT?

WHY, ONLY THAT A *JUDGE* SHOULD EVER SETTLE GRIEVANCES. SO I'D LIKE YOU AND YOUR BAND OF MERRY FOLK *GONE* BY FIRST LIGHT. COME THE MORN, *NO SIGHT OF YE.*

READ THIS, EALDORMAN, IF YOU'RE LITERATE.

*"TO ALL MY DUKES, VASSALS, AND FREE SERFS. WE HEREBY DECLARE PRINCESS RENFRI OF CREYDEN TO BE IN OUR SERVICE. SHOULD ANYONE SEEK TO DO HER **HARM,** THEY WILL BRING DOWN UPON THEIR HEADS OUR **WRATH**... SIGNED, AUODEN, KING OF..."*

SEAL *LOOKS* GENUINE.

BECAUSE IT *IS.* YOU WILL NOT DRIVE ME OUT OF BLAVIKEN, MY GOOD EALDORMAN. I'VE BROKEN NO LAWS. *YET.*

I'D LIKE A WORD WITH YOU, WITCHER.

DON'T YE BE LATE FOR SUPPER, GERALT, LEST LIBUSHKA TAKE OFFENSE.

NOT TO WORRY. I'LL BE ON TIME.

I'VE HEARD TALK OF YOU, WITCHER. YOU'RE ***GERALT OF RIVIA,*** THE WHITE-HAIRED ONE. IS STREGOBOR A FRIEND?

NO.

THAT CERTAINLY OUGHT TO... ***SIMPLIFY*** THINGS.

NOT REALLY. NOT ABOUT TO JUST STAND AND WATCH.

STREGOBOR DIES TOMORROW. IT ***WOULD*** BE THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS WERE HE TO DIE ***ALONE.***

IF HE DIES... ***BEFORE*** HE DIES, ***OTHERS*** WILL DIE, TOO. DON'T SEE ANY OTHER WAY.

WHEREAS ***I*** DO. WE COULD TALK, BUT... ***LIBUSHKA*** AWAITS. A MAIDEN YOUNG AND FAIR, AT THE LEAST?

GOT NOTHIN' ELSE TO SAY?

NO. YOU SHOULD GO.

IT WOULD BE ***RUDE*** TO KEEP HER WAITING.

DELICIOUS. THANK YOU.

NOW IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME, TIME TO RETIRE. BEEN A *LONG* DAY. G'NIGHT, LIBUSHKA, CALDEMEYN.

AND A GOOD NIGHT TO YOU, GERALT.

KATAKLYSM

?

KLIK

!

I THOUGHT WE'D END UP IN BED TOGETHER... BUT, SO ***SOON...?***

YOU.

ME.

WE'VE TWO OPTIONS, AS I SEE IT. EITHER GET OFF ME AND WE TALK, OR STAY AS YOU ARE, BUT THEN ***I'D*** LIKE TO REMOVE MY BOOTS.

I FIGURED YOU MIGHT BE DRY, SO I BROUGHT A LITTLE SOMETHING.

IT'S LATE. YOU SNUCK IN THROUGH THE WINDOW. CARE TO TELL ME ***WHY?***

CAN YOU TRULY BE ***THIS*** CLUELESS, WITCHER?

I WISH TO ***SAVE*** BLAVIKEN, PREVENT A ***SLAUGHTER.***

YOU SHOULD SHOW SOME ***APPRECIATION.*** I CRAWLED ACROSS ROOFTOPS LIKE A ***CAT IN HEAT*** TO ***TALK*** TO YOU.

DOESN'T MATTER. DOESN'T CHANGE A THING. PICTURE'S ***CRYSTAL CLEAR*** TO ME ALREADY.

STREGOBOR'S HOLED UP IN HIS TOWER. ATTACK IT, AND ALL OF BLAVIKEN'LL OPPOSE YOU.

THEN ALL OF BLAVIKEN WILL ***REGRET*** DOING SO.

CAN ***YOU*** IMAGINE? THE ***BOOBS*** IN THE TOWN MILITIA FIGHTING ***MY*** LADS?

CAN YOU IMAGINE ***ME*** STANDING IDLY BY AS IT HAPPENS?

THE EALDORMAN'S MY HOST. BEHOOVES ME TO SUPPORT HIM, STAND BY HIS SIDE.

AND I'VE NO DOUBT YOU MIGHT ***WISH*** TO, BUT ALAS, YOU'D BE ***ALONE.*** THE REST WOULD SCURRY AWAY AND HIDE LIKE RATS. AND ***NO*** WARRIOR FACES ***SEVEN SWORDSMEN*** AND EMERGES THE ***VICTOR.***

ENOUGH OF THIS ***INTIMIDATION GAME,*** WITCHER.

AS I SAID, THE SLAUGHTER IS ***PREVENTABLE.*** IT WOULD TAKE JUST ONE OF TWO SOULS TO ACHIEVE IT.

GOT MY ATTENTION. I'M ALL EARS.

ONE--STREGOBOR HIMSELF. HE MUST EMERGE FROM HIS TOWER. I SHALL TAKE HIM AWAY. BLAVIKEN WILL BE SAFE.

OLD COOT MIGHT LOOK AND SOUND A LITTLE DERANGED, BUT HE'S NOT STARK RAVIN' MAD.

CERTAIN OFFERS *CANNOT* BE REFUSED. THE TRIDAM ULTIMATUM FOR ONE, WHICH I SHALL PRESENT TO THE SORCERER.

WHAT'D THAT BE?

Tut-tut, MY LITTLE SECRET, WITCHER.

WON'T KEEP IT LONG, I WAGER...

BUT LET'S TALK ABOUT THIS ***OTHER*** INDIVIDUAL WHO CAN PREVENT THE SLAUGHTER. THINK I GOT AN IDEA WHO IT MIGHT BE.

YOU. WHEN IN A DISPLAY OF ROYAL GENEROSITY, YOU ABANDON YOUR BLOOD LUST AND QUEST FOR REVENGE. I GUESS RIGHT?

HAHAHAHA!

ROYAL?! *Hm,* TRUE, I WAS ONCE A PRINCESS, GERALT.

BUT THAT WAS ***LONG AGO*** IN CREYDEN.

"I HAD ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING I'D EVER DREAMT OF. FINE GOWNS, SILK SLIPPERS, BATISTE BLOOMERS, JEWELS, TRINKETS, AND SERVANTS TO SATISFY MY EVERY WHIM...

"...UNTIL STREGOBOR AND MY ***WHORE OF A STEPMOTHER,*** ARIDEA, COMMANDED A HUNTER TO TAKE ME INTO THE WOODS, ***MURDER ME,*** AND RETURN WITH MY HEART AND LIVER AS PROOF."

"GLAD YOU GOT ONE OVER ON THE HUNTER."

"LIKE ***HELL*** I DID. INDEED, HE SPARED ME AND LET ME GO. BUT NOT BEFORE HE'D ***RAPED ME,*** ROBBED ME OF ANYTHING OF VALUE.

"AND JUST LIKE THAT... THE PRINCESS WAS ***GONE.***

"MY DRESS WAS TORN. BATISTE BLOOMERS... SNOW WHITE NO MORE.

"MY LIFE CHANGED. IT WAS *MUCK* AND *MIRE*, *HUNGER* AND *THIRST*, *KICKS* AND *STICKS*.

"I WOULD SELL MYSELF TO SCUMBAGS FOR A *BOWL OF SOUP* AND A STRAW MATTRESS FOR THE NIGHT.

"I *STOLE* TO AVOID STARVING.

"I *KILLED* SO AS NOT TO *BE* KILLED.

"I ROTTED IN PISS-DRENCHED GAOLS.

"AND ALL THE WHILE, MY STEPMOTHER AND *YOUR* SORCERER HOUNDED ME, SENT ASSASSINS, SOUGHT TO POISON ME...

"...I WAS HUNTED LIKE A *WILD BEAST*.

"SO A DISPLAY OF ROYAL GENEROSITY? FORGIVENESS?

"NO, WITCHER. THAT'S SIMPLY *NOT ME*."

ARIDEA MET HER DEMISE IN HER BED. SHAME, REALLY, AS I'D HAD SOMETHING SPECIAL LINED UP. BUT NOW...

...NOW *I* HAVE THE *MAGE.*

SO, *YES.* ONE OF *TWO* CAN PREVENT BLOODSHED IN BLAVIKEN. BUT THE SECOND IS NONE OTHER THAN *YOU.* YOU MUST MERELY... *KILL STREGOBOR.*

NOT A KILLER FOR HIRE.

DON'T YOU SEE THIS IS THE BEST SOLUTION? THE LESSER EVIL?

KNOW WHY STREGOBOR AND THE DUCHESS WANTED YOU DEAD?

I'M *CURSED,* OR SO THEY SAY. TAINTED WHILE IN MY MOTHER'S WOMB. A...*MONSTER.*

AND *ARE* YOU?

I WISH TO HEAR *YOUR* ANSWER, WITCHER. WHAT DO YOU SAY?

NO.

DID STREGOBOR BID YOU TO KILL ME?

YEAH. SAW IT AS THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS, TOO.

AM I RIGHT TO ASSUME YOU TURNED *HIM* DOWN AS WELL?

YEAH.

WHY?

LESSER EVIL-- DON'T BELIEVE THERE'S SUCH A THING.

YOU DON'T SAY. WELL, I SUPPOSE YOU'RE *HALF* RIGHT.

YOU SEE, THERE'S *EVIL* AND *GREATER* EVIL. WHILE IN THE SHADOWS BEHIND BOTH LURKS... *GRAND EVIL.*

AND SOMETIMES, ALBEIT VERY RARELY, *GRAND EVIL* GRABS YOU BY THE THROAT AND SAYS, *"IT'S EITHER ME OR MY LESSER BROTHER, MY FRIEND. CHOOSE."*

WON'T LET YA KILL STREGOBOR IN BLAVIKEN. NOT GONNA HAPPEN.

NO BLOODSHED. NOT WHILE I'M AROUND.

I *pity* you, witcher.

STANDING IN A SQUARE AMIDST POOLS OF BLOOD...

"...WHOLLY *ALONE,* BECAUSE YOU COULDN'T MAKE A CHOICE.

"YOU WERE UNABLE, YET YOU *DID.* AND YOU WILL *NEVER* KNOW, NEVER BE CERTAIN. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"WHO *ARE* YOU?"

"I AM WHAT I AM."

WHERE ARE YOU?

I'M... *cold...*

RENFRI.

YOU *WIN*, WITCHER. I SHALL LEAVE BLAVIKEN TOMORROW, NEVER TO SET FOOT IN THIS *ROTTEN TOWN* AGAIN.

IT'S SUCH A *STEEP* ROOF, GERALT. MIND IF I STAY TILL DAWN?

UNSEEMLY WORDS FOR A *PRINCESS*, RENFRI.

AND WHAT DO *YOU* KNOW OF PRINCESSES? WHY, THE ENTIRE *POINT* OF BEING ONE IS TO DO *WHATEVER YOU PLEASE.*

MUST I TRULY SPEAK *MORE* PLAINLY, GERALT?

RENFRI?

YES?

BATISTE?

DAMN RIGHT IT IS. I'M A PRINCESS, AM I NOT?

The next day...

AM I EVER GLAD THEY'RE LEAVIN'!

A PROPERLY *ROTTEN* BUNCH, THAT. FOLK RECOGNIZED SOME.

CIVRIL, THE HALF ELF? A BRIGAND, PROFESSIONAL KILLER. THEY SAY HE WERE AT THE TRIDAM MASSACRE. AND THE SCAR FACED ONE...!

THE MASSACRE *WHERE?*

AT *TRIDAM.* THE LOCAL BARON HAD CAPTURED SOME BANDITS, 'ELD THEM IN HIS DUNGEON. THEIR COMRADES, LED BY CIVRIL, SEIZED A FERRY FULL OF PILGRIMS ON THE RIVER THERE.

THEY SENT THEIR DEMANDS TO THE BARON-- TO FREE THE PRISONERS. BARON REFUSED, *naturally,* SO THEY BEGAN *KILLIN'* THE PILGRIMS, ONE BY ONE.

SLICE

AFORE THE BARON SOFTENED AND LET THE BRIGANDS OUT, CIVRIL AN' HIS CREW HAD TOSSED A DOZEN BODIES OVERBOARD. WHEN SORELY JUDGED FOR GIVIN' IN, THE BARON CLAIMED HE'D CHOSEN THE LESSER EVIL, WHAT WITH A QUARTER THOUSAND FOLK ON THE FERRY.

TRIDAM ULTIMATUM. Renfri...

WHAT'S THAT YOU SAID?

GOT *TRICKED,* CALDEMEYN. RENFRI AND HER MEN WON'T LEAVE. GONNA FORCE STREGOBOR TO EMERGE FROM THE TOWER. JUST AS THE BARON OF TRIDAM WAS FORCED.

THEY'LL START KILLIN' FOLK OFF AT THE MARKET. IT'S A WALLED-IN SQUARE. *A TRAP!*

BY THE GODS, GERALT! *SIT YERSELF DOWN! WHERE'RE YE GOIN'?*

GERALT!

NEED TO STOP 'EM BEFORE THE SQUARE GETS CROWDED. SUMMON THE TOWN WATCH.

GERALT, BE REASONABLE! THEY 'AVEN'T DONE NOWT! WE CAN'T TOUCH 'EM!

TOLD YE! NOTHIN' BUT *TROUBLE,* THAT ONE!

TRIDAM, THE 'ALF ELF, IT'S ALL *GOSSIP* FOR ALL WE KNOW! WHAT IF YE'RE *WRONG?* AUODEN'LL 'AVE ME *FLAILED,* 'E WILL!

GOTTA CHOOSE THE *LESSER* EVIL!

NOT ENOUGH HERE, CIVRIL.

THEY WILL COME.

TAKE A GANDER!

IT SEEMS RENFRI WAS RIGHT.

HOLD THERE, WITCHER!

WHERE IS SHE?

AT THE TOWER. WITH AN OFFER FOR THE SORCERER.

SHE KNEW YOU'D COME. I'VE *TWO* MESSAGES FOR YOU.

THE FIRST IS: "*I AM WHAT I AM. YOU MUST CHOOSE. EITHER ME OR THE OTHER, LESSER ONE.*"

SHE SAID YOU'D KNOW ITS MEANING.

SHINK

SHE SAW IT *ALL*, WITCHER. AND THAT BRINGS ME TO THE SECOND MESSAGE. WHICH YOU SHALL GET RIGHT BETWEEN THE EYES.

SHAK

He... knocked it away...

ALL AT ONCE!

AT HIM!

SFFK

SHAK

FIFTEEN!

NO!

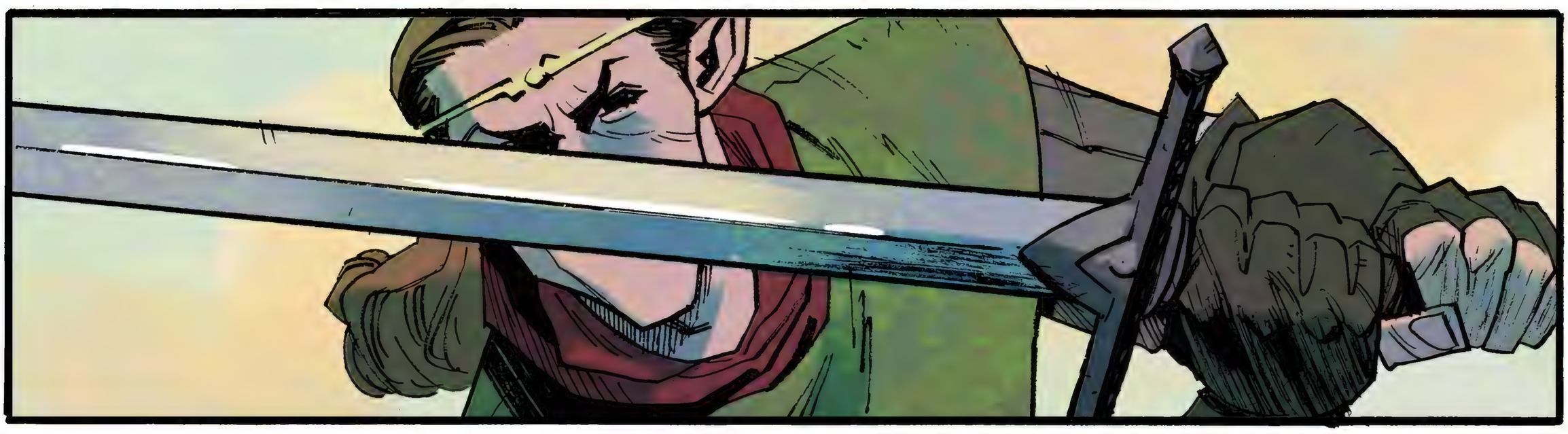
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AAHH

AHHH--

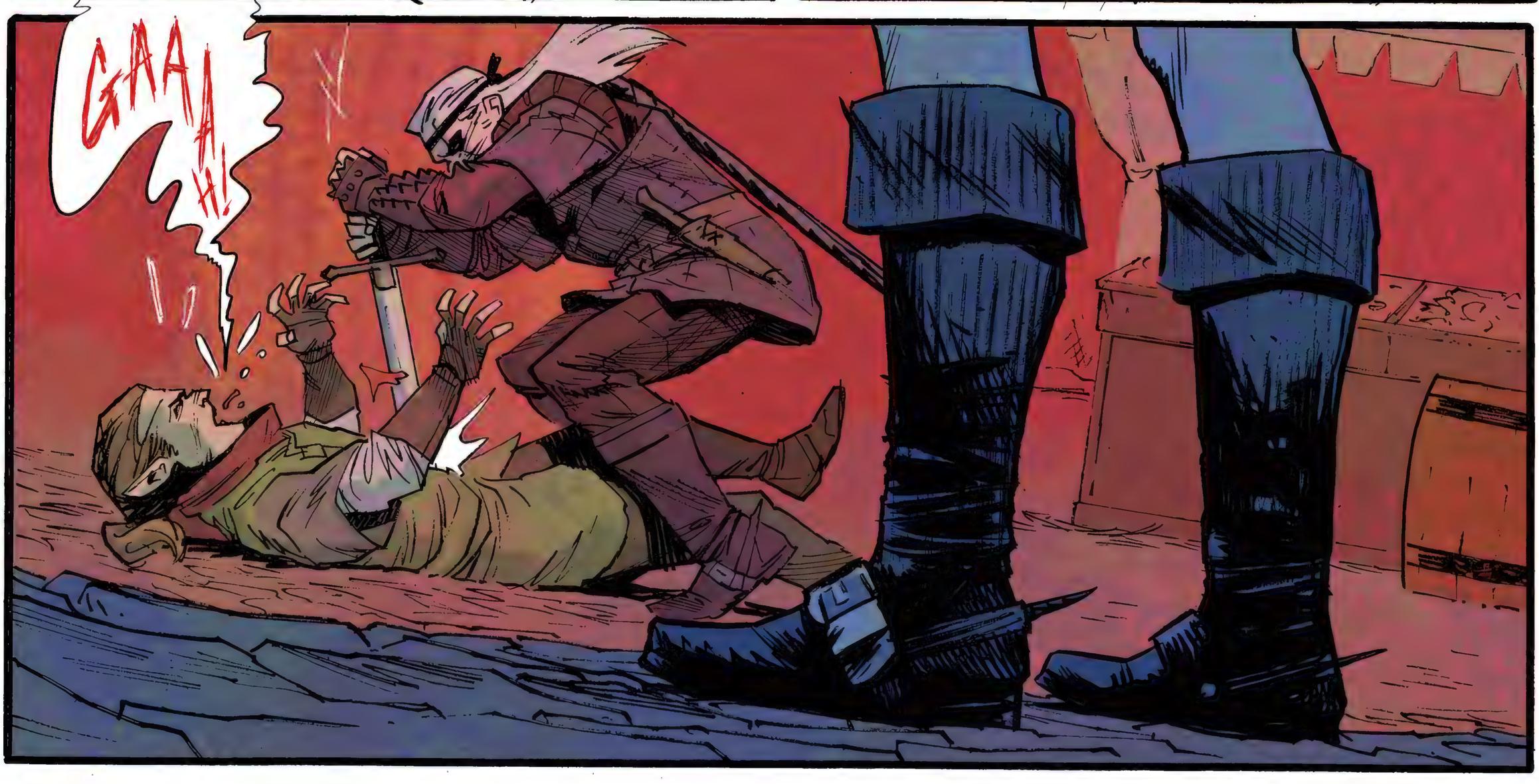
Ah.








VICE


GAAAH!

I SEE YOU'VE MADE YOUR CHOICE. IS IT THE RIGHT ONE? ARE YOU *CERTAIN?*

YOU WON'T MAKE THIS ANOTHER *TRIDAM,* RENFRI. WON'T *LET* YOU.

IT *COULDN'T* BE ONE. STREGOBOR LAUGHED ME OFF. HE SAID I COULD MURDER ALL BLAVIKEN AND A FEW VILLAGES MORE, YET HE WOULD REMAIN IN HIS TOWER.

LEAVE, RENFRI.

NO, GERALT. YOU MADE YOUR CHOICE.

IT'S TIME *I* MADE *MINE.*

RIIP

THAT'S OF NO USE, WITCHER. YOUR MAGIC TRICKS WON'T WORK ON ME. YOU'VE BUT YOUR *SWORD* TO RELY ON.

LEAVE, RENFRI. WE CLASH SWORDS, I WON'T... *can't...*

I KNOW. I FEEL THE SAME WAY.

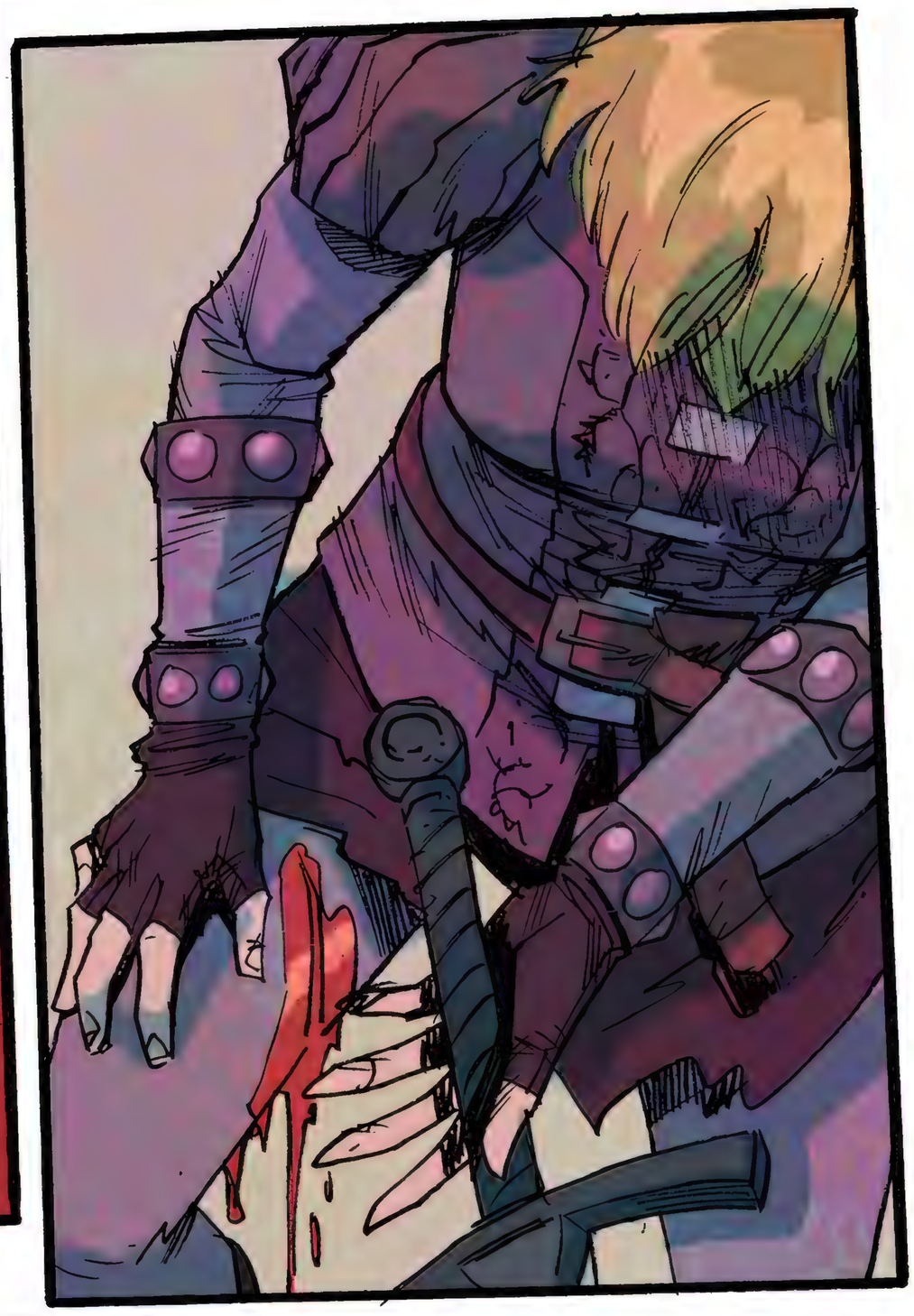
YOU AND I... WE ARE WHAT WE ARE...


KLANG
KLANG
KLANG






SLICE





Don't...

...go...

I'm...

...cold...

Hold me...

...Geralt...



TOK

TOK

THE CARNAGE... I *SAW IT* IN MY GLASS.

SHRIKE IS *DEAD.* Hard to believe...

COME, GERALT. FETCH A CART. WE MUST TAKE HER TO THE TOWER. A POSTMORTEM WILL EXPLAIN MUCH.

HANDS OFF, SORCERER.

TOUCH HER, AND YOUR HEAD LANDS NEXT TO HERS.

ARE YOU *MAD,* GERALT?

AN AUTOPSY'S THE ONLY WAY TO DETERMINE--

DO.

NOT.

TOUCH.

VERY WELL! HAVE IT YOUR WAY! BUT YOU WILL NEVER KNOW, UNDERSTAND? YOU WILL NEVER BE *CERTAIN,* GERALT! DO YOU HEAR ME?

LEAVE.

I'M PREPARED TO LEAVE THIS PLACE FOR *GOOD.* AND I WOULD DO THE SAME WERE I YOU.

THESE FOLK KNOW *NOTHING.* THEY HAVE ONLY SEEN YOU *KILL.*

AND WHEN YOU KILL, IT IS *BRUTAL,* GERALT, IT IS *ODIOUS.*

"I *PITY* YOU, WITCHER..."

KHNK

GAH!

ENOUGH! THAT'S ENOUGH FROM YOUSE!

"...YOU COULDN'T MAKE A *CHOICE.*"

IS THIS WHAT YER ***LESSER EVIL*** LOOKS LIKE, WITCHER? IS THIS WHAT YE ***CHOSE?***

DONE WHAT WAS ***NECESSARY,*** 'AVE YOU?

YEAH.

"YOU WERE ***UNABLE,*** YET YOU ***DID.***"

IF THAT'S THE CASE, YE'RE TO *LEAVE* NOW.

AND DON'T EVER COME BACK!

"YOU WILL NEVER KNOW, NEVER BE CERTAIN.

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND...?

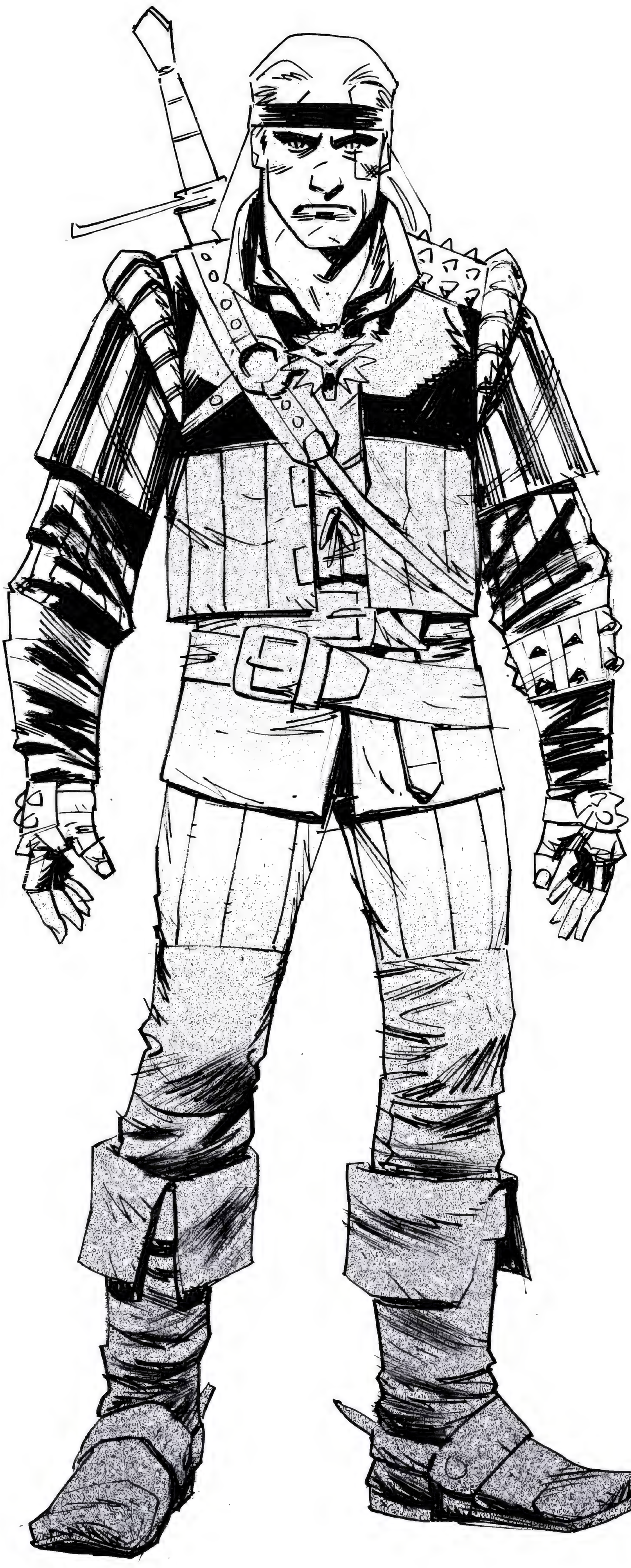
"NEVER."

The End.



CHARACTER SKETCHES OF GERALT

BY ADAM GORHAM









CHARACTER SKETCHES OF RENFRI

BY ADAM GORHAM





CHARACTER SKETCHES OF STREGOBOR

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Special thanks to CD Projekt Red, including: Michał Nowakowski, *SVP of Business Development* • Adam Badowski, *Head of Studio* • Marcin Blacha, *Story Director* • Borys Czarnota, *English Adaptation Specialist* • Jared Dye, *English Adaptation Specialist*

Published by Dark Horse Books
A division of Dark Horse Comics LLC
10956 SE Main Street, Milwaukie, OR 97222

DarkHorse.com

To find a comics shop in your area, visit comicshoplocator.com

First edition: November 2023
Ebook ISBN 978-1-50672-722-6 | Hardcover ISBN 978-1-50672-696-0

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2
Printed in China

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C169962

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Rembiś, Jacek, author. | Gorham, Adam, artist. | Delpeche, Patricio, colorist. | Otsmane-Elhaou, Hassan, letterer. | Carpenter, Kai, artist. | Sapkowski, Andrzej, creator. | Sapkowski, Andrzej. Wiedźmin.
Title: The Witcher : the lesser evil / writer, Jacek Rembis ; artist, Adam Gorham ; colors, Patricio Delpeche ; letters, Hassan Otsmane-Elhaou ; cover art, Kai Carpenter.
Other titles: At head of title: Andrzej Sapkowski's
Description: Milwaukie, OR : Dark Horse Books, 2023.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022054733 (print) | LCCN 2022054734 (ebook) | ISBN 9781506726960 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781506727226 (ebook)
Subjects: LCGFT: Fantasy comics. | Graphic novels.
Classification: LCC PN6728.W5887 R56 2023 (print) | LCC PN6728.W5887 (ebook) | DDC 741.5/973--dc23/eng/20221117
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022054733
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022054734

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